Thinking of research supervision as a form of teaching

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Historically, research supervision has been regarded as an adjunct of research; it was assumed that, as Rudd (1985: 79-80) put it, ‘if one can do research then one presumably can supervise it’. However, over the past two decades or so, there has been a recognition that, while being active in research is a necessary condition for effective supervision, it is not a sufficient one (see for example Taylor and Beasley 2005). The reason for that is that supervision is increasingly being perceived as a form of teaching, in fact ‘probably the most subtle and complex in which we engage’ (Brown and Atkins 1988:115).

If it is accepted that supervision is, in whole or in part, a form of teaching, the implication then is that, to be an effective supervisor, you need to be an effective teacher. That, in turn, begs the question of what constitutes effective teaching in the supervision context.

Currently, research in this area is in its infancy, but the available evidence (see for example Grant 2000; Barron and Zeegers 2000; Bartlett and Mercer 2000; Johnson et al 2000; Brew and Pesata 2002; Boud and Lee 2005; Ferman 2002; Green 2005; Hasrati 2005; Pearson 2005) suggests that asking the same questions as we would about conventional teaching can help to inform and illuminate our practice.

So, in the same way as the starting point for conventional teaching is to ask about the assumptions about teaching and learning brought to the programme by students, so the starting point for supervision is to ask about the pre-conceptions of the nature of research brought by research students. There is some evidence (Bills 2004, Collinson 2005, Kiley and Mullins 2005) that such pre-conceptions are often very different to the realities of modern research projects, and that this can be a cause of student difficulties.

Of course, just as students have pre-conceptions of research, so do supervisors in relation to what they expect research students to do and to be capable of doing. As Kiley and Mullins (2005) again have shown, these pre-conceptions are often formed on the basis of their own experience and extrapolated to research students without regard to the individuality and/or the increased diversity of the latter, leading to a potential for conflict.

Again from the conventional teaching and learning literature, we are accustomed to the notions of teaching and learning styles and to the interrelationship between them. This has been extended to research supervision (see for example Grant and Graham,1997 Kam, 1997; Pearson and Brew, 2002). A recent review of these and other sources by Gatfield (2005) extracted two key dimensions upon which supervisor styles have been arrayed, namely ‘structure’ and ‘support’, which was used to develop a typology of preferred supervisor styles as ‘laisser-faire’, ‘pastoral’ ‘directorical’ and ‘contractual’. Objectively, there is no ‘right’ style, but each of these styles
makes assumptions about students’ preferred learning styles. As Malfoy and Webb (2000) have suggested, as long as there is a congruence between the supervisory style and the student’s style, there should be no difficulties; but where there is a discongruence, major problems can result. Similarly, even if styles are initially aligned, they can and should change over the course of the research as the student moves to becoming an autonomous researcher. But, as Gurr (2001) has shown, this does not happen automatically; students can be reluctant to fly the nest and supervisors can be too protective in keeping them there or too pushy in sending them out, with the result that students are late developing independence or find themselves alone and at sea.

There is much more in the emerging literature on the pedagogy of doctoral supervision than can be mentioned here. But, for academic staff starting out on a career as a supervisor, the key messages are:

(i) to think of supervision as a form of teaching;
(ii) to reflect on what you expect your research students to do and take time to find out what they think research is about;
(iii) to find out about your preferred supervisor style;
(iv) to monitor the changing balance of dependence and independence over the course of the research project.

With regard to (ii) and (iii) it is worth noting that there is a very useful questionnaire to be found at [http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/research/postgrad/resources/expectations.pdf](http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/research/postgrad/resources/expectations.pdf) which you can complete yourself or, even better, ask your research students to complete independently and then compare the results.

References


